6th International Conference on Intercultural Education "Education and Health: From a transcultural perspective"

Discovery of one's own and the other's work environment through an intercultural career guidance virtual system

Antonio Pantoja[a]*, José Marcos Resola[a]

aUniversity of Jaén, Campus Las Lagunillas, s/n, 23071, Jaén

Abstract

Not many references can be found in specialized literature on professional guidance from an intercultural viewpoint. Besides, to the best of our knowledge, it has not been approached from ITC and the Internet. Thus, the present research was aimed at attaining better understanding of the professions in the immediate environment of students in third year of primary education, from which an extract was chosen to illustrate the present paper. All in all, 435 students from six different countries took part in this project, interacting with one another and working in twinned teams of three pupils by means of a virtual learning environment (an educational platform) created ad hoc. Materials are interactive and, therefore, favour cooperative learning. Likewise, some communicative tools such as a social network are integrated into the platform. Our research follows qualitative methodology based on both the analysis of all completed work and a final portfolio. The obtained results and conclusions clearly prove that students improve their knowledge of other cultures after contact with their twinned mates, while simultaneously improve their knowledge of themselves and their own environment so as to make it known to their mates. The participating students' analyses of their teachers', parents' and close relatives' professions are remarkable.

Keywords: Intercultural; education, ITC, career guidance.

1. Introduction

Spanish Organic Educational Law 2/2006 states in its first article that the main principles and aims of the

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-953-212-358; fax: +34-053-211-809.
 E-mail address: apantoja@ujaen.es

educational system include students' educational and professional guidance as a necessary means to achieve personalised training leading to the integral acquisition of knowledge, skills and values by students, supported by specialised services and departments. Article 91.d regulates teachers' duties, including student educational, academic and professional guidance in collaboration with specialised services and departments.

Andalusian Regional Government Educational Law 17/2007 states that fostering educational guidance as a means for personal development and as a guarantee of an educational response adjusted to the students' needs —as well as educational evaluation as an instrument to improve learning processes, results, and educational centre organization and operation— as one of its main aims. Article 7 states that students have the right to receive educational and professional guidance, while Article 141 regulates that every group of students must have a tutor appointed by the educational centre's director. Together with families, tutors are in charge of managing and guiding students' learning, and support their educational process.

Educational legislation must take 21st-century socioeconomic reality into account in countries currently undergoing either economic recession or growth. Changes in all directions and sectors are taking place in the former countries' societies. At economic level, emphasis on a neoliberal model is forcing us into a globalisation process led by competitiveness, performance, quality and effectiveness. This is in turn leading companies to close down and move to cheaper continents, as well as to labour suffocation. At social level, family is again clung to for economic salvation, barter is also back, and solidarity springs across social movements with wide citizen demands. Disappointment with politicians is extending, yet not citizens' voting intentions. At educational level, many students who dropped out of school during the real-estate bubble are back to classrooms, yet school drop rates remain high. A relevant ratio of students reach no basic formal training credentials, entering the sociological group known as NEET. Besides, the educational system offers them no alternative, markedly-professional training, opting again for academicism. The present situation is developing within an educational context marked by the acquisition of basic competences, which have become the reference for evaluation, promotion and graduation purposes. Working opportunities are promoting long-forgotten professions such as machine operators and the discovery of new ones such as community manager.

Solutions for the present economic and socio-educational situation demand efforts from all social sectors and, particularly, from the educational system through the implementation of true professional guidance, not only punctually within the tutorial action plan developed throughout compulsory secondary education, but beginning in primary education and being transversally included in curriculum-planned interventions, subjects and school organization. Rodríguez Moreno (1991, p. 206), defines professional guidance as a "Set of multiples processes, techniques and services devised to help students to help themselves, act consequently, familiarise with working, educational and leisure world's opportunities, and to develop the necessary skills to make decisions aimed at organising their own working life".

The implementation of professional guidance in educational spheres is ruled by the principles compiled by Grañeras & Parras (2008, p. 35): prevention (based on the need to prepare students to overcome successive forthcoming developmental crises), development (support students throughout their development to maximise their possibilities), social intervention (all guiding interventions must take the students' environmental and contextual conditions into account), and empowerment (referred to the students' acquisition of command on the issues of their interest).

What is professional guidance for? Echevarría (2008, p. 155) categorizes the functions of professional guidance into: the evaluating function (which helps getting to know students individually), the informational function (which favours getting to know the students' training and working environment), and the promoter function (which helps them to make decisions, being aimed at promoting the development of students' all personal potentialities).

Our project is focused on the informative and integral-development promoter functions through information and communication technologies. According to Rivas (1995, p. 310), vocational information is "a process of significant-knowledge acquisition for individuals who are immersed in guidance programmes aimed at helping them reach their vocational maturity". This acquisition process cannot be specifically located in critical guiding moments towards the end of basic education, but it must be implemented throughout the whole schooling period. This information provides students with greater choice possibilities, warning them against vocational indecision. Therefore, this information is required to meet criteria of student comprehension, and adequacy to modes of

presentation, and students' maturity and educational level. This information must be structured from nearness to remoteness, bearing in mind vocational content's potential cognitive and experiential implications for students (Rivas, 1995).

Another feature of the present project is the use of information and communication technologies. Online virtual environments are created to promote students' learning. However, for this learning to take place, some pedagogical, technological and organizational aspects must be taken into account (Salinas, 2004).

The most outstanding innovation of our project is connecting students from different continents through the Internet. Spanish —the second most-widely spoken language in the world— is taken and used as a lingua franca, being an elective language for English-speaking students. The intercultural contribution of our project is not in the classical version of foreign students' adaptation to the receiving country but in the direct communication, contrast and online assessment of the working world in other continents. Our psychopedagogical intervention is intercultural, since it meets the requirements set by Repetto (2002): a) it acknowledges that all guidance approaches and theories are developed within a specific interactive context; b) it is referred to an interaction in which two or more participants belong to different cultures; c) it includes any combination of techniques involving a culture; and d) it is characterised by professional advice with culturally-appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes.

2. Methodology

2.1. Background

The IDEO research group (HUM 660) (http://www.grupoideo.net) has developed since 2005 a longitudinal research based on the constructivist and cognitive learning model, in which information and communication technologies are used from a socio-educational viewpoint to promote attitudes and competences in the development of intercultural education. The main idea is that students make use of computers to learn and improve acknowledgement and respect among different cultures.

With this purpose consecutive projects are built, being known as e-Culturas® (www.e-culturas.org), funded by the Andalusian Regional Government. At the same time, agreements have been reached with different European and Latin American universities. In 2007 the e-Culturas International Network is created. Apart from Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Portugal and United Kingdom take part in it.

This Network and its contents have progressively evolved from an early stage in which brotherhood relationships were fostered to promote an educational model that favours coexistence in societies where respect to different cultures predominates. Next, language was taken as the Network's main intercultural vehicle, and materials where translated into Portuguese. Finally, the professions in children's immediate environment were tackled as a basis for the development of intercultural activities. Here is where we are now.

Experiences and materials have progressively been presented in congresses (Campoy, Pantoja & Villanueva, 2006; Pantoja, Campoy, Jiménez & Villanueva, 2008; Pantoja, Jiménez & Blanco, 2012), as well as in different papers (Pantoja, Díaz Linares & Zwierewicz, 2010; Pantoja, 2013), being available for teachers and researchers in general.

2.2. Design and objectives

The development of the e-Culturas International Network enters in 2012 a new stage devoted to "Share and get to know to decide upon my profession: An intercultural online career guidance proposal", which is the Network's working slogan. It is aimed at favouring cultural interaction and knowledge among students and teachers in the educational centres in the Network, as well as 11-12-year-old students, who are in the last years of primary education. The aim of the present research is the exchange of information on professions around the world so as to allow immigrant students to complete a process of career guidance adjusted to their needs, potentialities, and the labour market's reality.

The project mainly consists on cooperative work in teams of three twinned children within a virtual learning environment designed by research group IDEO on a specifically-designed platform (www.e-culturas.org), which must be accessed with a password when information may affect data confidentiality. These are its main objectives:

- Contributing to the students' development of linguistic, social, cultural, digital and emotional competences.
- Getting to know the participating students' customs, beliefs and values regarding the working world.
- Promoting the acceptance and acknowledgement of cultural diversity.
- Getting to know professions in the labour market, their access requirements, the tasks to be developed, and their working conditions.

In the first part of the research a qualitative methodology is used to give priority to the students' knowledge on themselves and their environment, apart from improving twinned mates' behaviour and their immediate professional reality.

This intercultural programme includes several stages (see Figure 1). However, we shall only refer to the first stage, titled "The place I live in", which extends over 10 weeks including activities to prepare photos, videos and communication (social panel and videoconferences). These are its blocks of contents:

- Block 1: Who are we?
- Block 2: My work
- Block 3: The jobs of my relatives
- Block 4: Researching the manufacture of a typical product

All materials on the platform are interactive and allow participants to access the production of all the remaining users, which are exhibited on a digital wall.
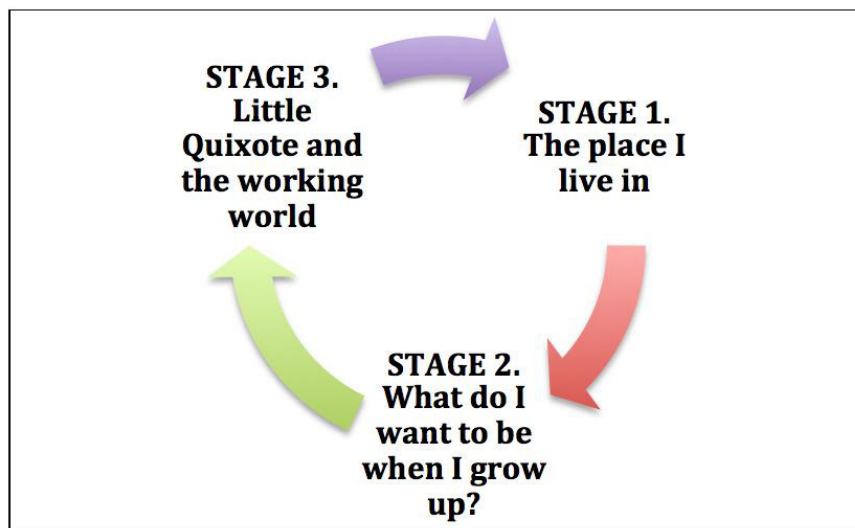

Fig. 1. Development stages for the e-Culturas intercultural programme.

2.3. Participants

A total number of 439 students and 19 teachers took part in the 213rd edition (Table 1). The latter were backed by a team of coordinators in each country that comprised 9 professionals in Spain (IDEO Group and exclusively for

Ceuta), 2 in Brazil, 2 in Argentina, and 1 in Chile, Paraguay and Portugal. Their tasks include qualification, support and data collection aimed at improving materials and the platform.

Table 1. Participating students and teachers.

Countries	Students	Teachers
Spain	126	6
Argentina	57	2
Brazil	177	8
Paraguay	22	1
Portugal	21	1
Chile	36	1
TOTAL	439	19

2.4. Instrument

Several instruments were used for data collection purposes, yet in this first stage the digital portfolio -integrated in the platform itself as a part of the students' tasks- was the main one. Table 2 shows the main issues that integrate the digital portfolio.

Table 2.

Express your opinion on each of the following aspects regarding this first section of e-Culturas titled "The place I live in". Write everything you want and take the time you need. Remember to use appropriate language. Thank you!

Have the activities that made you think about yourself helped you to get to know yourself better? Have you discovered any new qualities or defects in yourself?

What aspects of your twinned mates do you think you know better now?

Point out the most striking aspects of your twinned mates' lives.

What do you think of your twinned mates' families and their jobs?

Think of your family: Do you think you will excel your dad's level of studies? And your mum's?

Do you think your friends' opinions will influence your decision to keep on studying or drop school to look for a job? Why?

What similarities and differences have you observed between your school and your twinned mates' schools?

What do you think it is the best part of being a teacher? And the worst, most difficult or most unacknowledged part of it?

What differences do you observe between your parents' and your twinned mates' parents' jobs?

How many professions has your dad developed along his working life? Have you ever heard him complaining about having dropped out of school?

How many professions has your mum developed along her working life? Have you ever heard her complaining about having dropped out of school?

What is the typical product you have enjoyed most among those presented by your twinned mates? Why? What do you think about the professions involved in their manufacture?

What have you learnt from the other cultures that you have known through the programme (history, traditions, people, etc.)?

Now express your opinion on this section of e-Culturas that you are about to finish. Was it interesting, encouraging, attractive? Did you like it? In what sense?

3. Results

Students' different contributions were classified by the research team for analysis aimed at making them understandable. Given the responses' simplicity, no software package was needed for their analysis, so a traditional counting system was used. The main contributions to each of them are briefly summarised next:

3.1. We know ourselves better

- Self-knowledge: The proposed tasks have allowed all students to get to know themselves better, since they were asked to research their own personal lives to show their mates how they are and depict their immediate environment. This has forced them to compare similarities and differences, leading them to find that "they are very similar". In addition, it has led them to discover own qualities and also defects they were unaware of. A Brazilian girl states: "I have learnt things about my family that I considered unimportant before".
- Knowledge of their twinned mates: Latin American children think that their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts are quicker-finishers upon task completion and also develop a higher number of tasks throughout the school day. However, they point out that their musical and food interests do not differ as much as expected, yet no unanimity is reached regarding food, as clear differences are found regarding food products. Likewise, they realize that meal hours differ throughout the day, as well as skin colour. A girl comments that these personal distinctions also take place within her immediate environment: "However, my brother and I are also different, because his skin is darker". This leads them to realize that differences are not only far away but also within their immediate environment, even within their family. Other similarities include the use of social networks and their liking for football, remarkably shared by Spanish and Brazilian students.

3.2. Working environment

- Professions in twinned mates' families: It is commonly observed that students are attracted by their mates' families, yet they do not compare them with their own families, but limit themselves to highlight their unity, adequate coexistence, family traditions, and respect among their members. Comments often stress some sort of family tradition upon professional choices: "Mi granddad had a car repair shop, and so does my dad".
- Family jobs: Some children take pride in their parents regarding their work and the fact that they may regret having dropped off from school. Some of them point their parents as an example to follow: "My dad always studied and never stopped doing it, so he has never regretted dropping off from school". However, some other students do admit this circumstance and express how their parents are trying to solve this situation: "My dad regrets having dropped off from school. Because now he has to study and attend university lessons". Some others' parents have no studies and consider themselves happy with their current job: "My mum has only worked in her current profession and I have never heard her express regret for having dropped off from school". However, another child reports: "My mum studied, but know she runs a clothes shop and is very happy with her job". That is, there is no need to have university studies to have a decent work and to fulfil oneself. This is another relevant idea learnt by students.
- Influence of family jobs and studies: A wide diversity is observed among responses. Some students refer their parents' low level of studies, while some others show themselves happy their parents keep on studying, particularly their mums. Regarding their choice of a degree, a child states: "I think that my decision to look for a job or keep on studying will not be influenced by my friends, because I am determined to follow my parents' advice". Others show their parents' affliction of not having been able to study, since they had to work to help their families economically. Therefore, these parents insist their children should keep on studying, encouraging them not to drop off school while they can and enjoy it. These complaints come in most cases from mums rather than dads who could not complete their studies due to varied reasons: "My mum regrets not having gone to university, and she has never regretted having gone to school or completed high school". Opinions regarding continuing family jobs are not unanimous: some think they will follow one of their parents' profession, while

some others think the other way. This circumstance may be due to children's early age, which prevents them from defining or even sketching their professional future.

- The school and the teacher: Children find educational centres very similar, yet with some differences regarding spaciousness, decoration, furniture, play areas, etc. Among the most striking aspects, the fact that some centres particularly value languages, some others being even bilingual. Some children refer holiday celebrations in educational centres in the participating countries, highlighting their differences and attractiveness. Regarding teachers' job, most of them point out that its best part is teaching children to be better people every day, while its most difficult part is that children often do not listen to their teachers, as well as controlling appropriate behaviour and silence in the classroom. Regarding the latter aspect, Brazilian children describe teachers' job as unpleasant because they work with "people who do not want to study and take everything as a joke". Another generalised opinion is that "the best thing about being a teacher is observing that students are interested in the lessons themselves and not only in attendance. Its worst part is observing that students do not want to learn and are not interested in the lessons". Students' valuation of teachers' job is very positive, being usually chosen by many as future studies, in spite of the fact that they state that "It is very beautiful to work with students, yet wages are low". Several Portuguese students affirm: "Teachers work very hard and earn little". And some others: "I would not become a teacher. Students often flout them". All these opinions show the teachers' job's complexity from the students' viewpoint, as well as some of this profession's implicit stereotypes.

- Professions taking part in the manufacture of a typical product: This category scarcely offers any interesting data, since students could not identify professions related to the chosen products. However, they did express their opinion —positive in all cases— about the commonest foods where they live, their taste, the people who sells them, the time when they are consumed, etc.

Finally, some general aspects of intercultural education and the e-Culturas programme are highlighted. The most striking aspect of this final assessment is that students pervasively stress the values appeared and developed throughout the project, such as sharing, helping the others, respecting children living in faraway places, becoming aware of nearness (i.e., of their immediate environment), taking part, collaborating, being formal and punctual upon task development not to bore and discourage their twinned mates, etc. Likewise, the fun side of this experience is also highlighted, since they have got to know faraway places that were completely unknown prior to this project, and have learnt to say some things in different languages (Spanish and Portuguese, which have common and different terms). This is highly significant, because learning took place among mates the same age with a similar perspective upon reality. To sum up, a student says: "I've enjoyed it, because my knowledge of the lifestyle of my mates here and there has improved". An Argentinean girl puts it this way: "It is beautiful to learn from other cultures".

4. Conclusions

Student participation in the project led to participating students' improved self-knowledge, as students did not only reflect on their personalities' strengths but also on their weaknesses. Their mates' opinions were observed to foster their personal development.

The intellectual and sociocultural expectations of students from other continents were completed, confirmed or improved by means of the programme's activities, which favoured the construction of social identities based on similarities rather than on differences.

Very similar school-centre structure was reported by all participating school centres, while substantial differences were observed in the offered curriculum substantially, particularly in language training through non-language subjects (aka bilingualism). All students highlight teachers' role to promote their personal growth, and also acknowledge teachers' need of additional help and support with students with low academic expectations.

The influence of family on students' initial making of vocational decisions is ascertained among all students. Training-promoted social mobility was observed to be a widely repeated advice among the students' mothers. On the other hand, life-long learning is observed to be acting as a remedy action for upward mobility in the labour market.

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